

From active sentences to press style

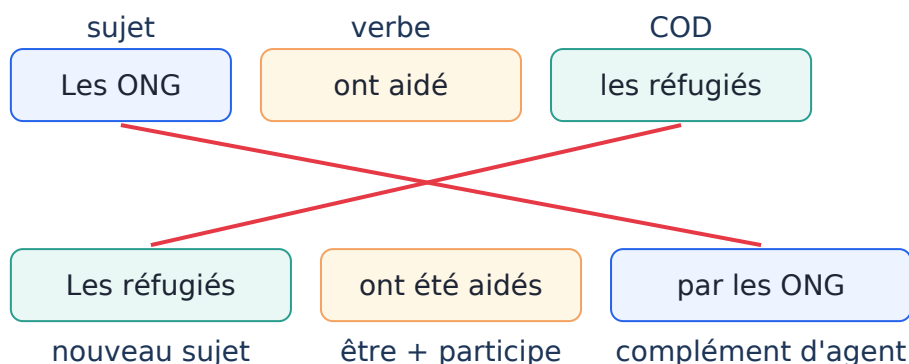
AP French Language and Culture · Lesson

Quick answer: The French passive is formed with être plus a past participle that agrees with the subject, and the agent follows par. French often avoids it with on or a reflexive verb. Press style also uses nominalization, which turns verbs into nouns: augmenter becomes l'augmentation.

Level: AP French Language and Culture · **Standards:** AP French Language and Culture (College Board CED), Theme: Global Challenges

How do you form the passive voice?

The object of the active sentence becomes the subject. Use être in the same tense as the active verb, then the past participle, which agrees with the new subject. The old subject becomes the agent after par.



The object becomes the subject; the subject becomes the agent.

Tense	Active	Passive
Present	Le maire ouvre l'école.	L'école est ouverte par le maire.
Passé composé	Les ONG ont distribué des vivres.	Des vivres ont été distribués par les ONG.
Imperfect	Un orage détruisait les récoltes.	Les récoltes étaient détruites par un orage.
Future	On construira un barrage.	Un barrage sera construit.
Subjunctive	Il faut qu'on signe le traité.	Il faut que le traité soit signé.

Par or de?

Use par for an agent that acts: Le projet est financé par la région. Use de after verbs of feeling or state: Il est aimé de tous. — He is loved by everyone.

How do you avoid the passive in French?

French prefers an active sentence. Use *on* when the agent is unknown: *On a signé le traité hier.*
Use a reflexive verb for general facts: *Le français se parle dans de nombreux pays.*

Common mistakes of English speakers

- Only a direct object can become the subject. "She was given a prize" is *On lui a donné un prix*, never *Elle a été donnée un prix*.
- The participle agrees: *Les lois ont été adoptées.*
- Do not copy English "by" after every participle; many French sentences simply use *on*.

What is nominalization?

Nominalization replaces a verb with its noun, which makes sentences shorter and more formal, the way press articles read.

Verb	Noun	Example
augmenter	l'augmentation	L'augmentation des prix inquiète les familles.
décider	la décision	La décision de fermer l'usine surprend tout le monde.
interdire	l'interdiction	L'interdiction du plastique réjouit les écologistes.
disparaître	la disparition	La disparition des forêts menace la biodiversité.

LE JOURNAL — UNE

Signature d'un cessez-le-feu

Vote d'une loi sur le tri des déchets

Baisse du chômage chez les jeunes

Nominal headlines have no verb and no article.

Reading the French press

French headlines often drop the verb and the article, or use the present tense for an event that already happened: *Le président signe l'accord.* Expect this style in the articles of the AP French reading section.

Zoé's tip

To spot a passive, look for être plus a participle that agrees. To nominalize, ask: what noun hides inside this verb?

Key points to remember

- Passive = être (any tense) + past participle, agreeing with the subject.
- The agent is introduced by par, or by de after verbs of feeling or state.
- French avoids the passive with on or a reflexive verb: Le français se parle ici.
- Only verbs with a direct object can become passive; "I was given a book" becomes On m'a donné un livre.
- Nominalization turns a verb into a noun and gives headlines and articles a compact style.

From Active Sentences to Press Style: frequently asked questions

How do you form the passive in French?

Conjugate être in the tense of the active verb and add the past participle, which agrees with the subject: La loi a été votée. The agent, if mentioned, follows par.

When do I use de instead of par?

Use de after verbs of feeling or state, such as aimé de, entouré de and respecté de. Use par for an agent that performs an action.

Why is the passive less common in French than in English?

French prefers on or a reflexive verb: On parle français ici or Le français se parle ici. French also cannot make an indirect object the subject.

What is nominalization in French?

It replaces a verb with its noun, such as décider becoming la décision. The result is shorter and more formal, which suits journalism and academic writing.

How do I write a French headline?

Use a noun phrase without a verb or article: Adoption d'une loi sur l'eau. Keep it short and put the key event first.